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The Concept of Tawheed

Fundamental to the religious structure of Islam is the concept of tawheed, or monotheism. As the seed is to tree, so is tawheed to Islam. Just as the tree is a wonderfully developed extension of the seed, so is the religious system of Islam a multi-faceted expression of a single basic concept. For monotheism in Islam does not mean simply belief in one God, but in God's oneness in all respects. No one shares in this oneness of God.

Anthropologists would have us believe that the concept of God in religion began with polytheism; that polytheism gradually developed into monotheism. That is, the concept of tawheed was an evolutionary feature of religion which emerged at a later stage. But, according to Islamic belief, the concept of tawheed has existed since the beginning of human life on this earth. The first man – Adam – was the first messenger of God. It was this first messenger who taught human beings the religion of tawheed.

It was in later generations that this religious system began to change. This happened principally because people began to make the assumption that divinity was inherent in natural phenomena. They wondered at the loftiness of the mountains, the unceasing flow of the rivers, and the extraordinary brilliance of the sun and moon, and took it that thing possessed of such awesome attributes must necessarily share in God's divinity. Men gifted with special talents likewise came to be included in the category of the divine; they were supposed to be incarnations of God Himself. It was in this manner that the concept of polytheism crept into the religious system.

In consonance with the view that human religions began with tawheed – with polytheism as a later development – the basic mission of all the Prophets who made their appearance at intervals in this world was to lead people away from the worship of many gods and back to the worship of the One God. In other words, to turn them away from the adulation of creatures and towards reverence for the Creator.

As a proof of the Creator's existence, the Qur'an advances the very fact of the existence of the universe. All studies of the universe show that it cannot be sui genesis: some other agent is essential for the universe to have come into existence. This means that the choice for us is not between a universe with God, or a universe without God. It is rather between a universe with God, or no universe at all. Since a non-existent universe is utterly inconceivable. We are forced to accept the option of a universe with God – a necessary condition also for the existence of human beings.

God created man and settled him on the earth. After installing him here, He has kept an unceasing watch over him. Life and death are equally in His hands. Whatever man gains or loses, it is all a matter of the will of God. As the Qur'an expresses it: "God; there is no god but He – the Living, the Eternal One. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. His is what the heavens and the earth contain. Who can intercede with Him, unless by His leave? He is cognizant of men's affairs, now and in the future. Men

can grasp only that part of His Knowledge which He wills. His throne is as vast as the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not weary Him. He is the Exalted, the Immense One.” (2:255)

While tawheed means the oneness of God, it must be stressed that this concept differs radically from pantheistic or animist notions that all the forms of existence are diverse manifestations of one and the same reality. On the contrary, the oneness of God as defined in Islam means that there is only one Being of the nature of God. All other things of the universe, be they physical or non-physical, are the creations of this One God: they are in no respect constituents of, or partners in the divine godhead.

However, in Islamic theology, tawheed does have two aspects to it: tawheed fi az-Zat and tawheed fi as-Sifat, that is, oneness of being and oneness of attributes. This means that in addition to the fact of there being only one Being who enjoys the status of divinity and possesses divine powers, there is also the fact that no-one else can have a share in, or lay claim to God's attributes: These include the power of creating and sustaining the universe with all its countless bodies in motion, of sustaining and nourishing our world, in short, of governing all the happenings in the heavens and on earth; all of these are directly managed by God. No representative or deputy of God has any power – either independent or delegated – over the events of the universe: “He throws the veil of night over the day. Swiftly they follow one another. It was He who created the sun, the moon and the stars and made them subservient to His will. His is the creation, His the command. Blessed be God, the Lord of all creatures.” (7:54)

The divisibility of the divine attributes is totally alien to Islam. Just as God is alone in His being, so is He alone in His attributes. In recognition of His uniqueness, the Qur'an opens with the following invocation: “Praise be to God, Lord of the universe, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Sovereign of the Day of Judgement. You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have favoured, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.” (1: 1-7)

Islam and Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism literally means to stick to the fundamentals or to stick to the basic teachings of a religion. As religious terminology this term originated in the early period of the 20th century. In its initial stages it was mainly a Christian phenomenon. Modernist Christians attempted to give a liberal interpretation to some biblical teachings like the concept of the virgin birth; atonement and resurrection etc.

The conservative Christians refused to accept this kind of liberal interpretation. They maintained that the Bible was a sacred book and that they were bound to take all its teachings' verbally. So the term fundamentalism was applied to the conservatives as against the liberals.

Later this term in its extended meaning began to be applied to other religions also, for instance, Islamic fundamentalism or Muslim fundamentalists.

The same story was repeated here also. Muslim modernists too started to give a liberal interpretation to the traditional teachings of Islam. Again the conservative Muslims opposed such a move. These Muslim conservatives came to be known as fundamentalists.

For instance, according to the traditional concept, the Qur'an was a book of God. The modernist Muslims attempted to give this concept a new interpretation. They said that the Qur'an came into being through divine inspiration received by the Prophet and that this inspiration was expressed by the Prophet in his own words. Thus although the Qur'an is a revelation of God, it is in the words of Muhammad (may peace be upon him). Now the conservatives among the Muslims refused to accept this interpretation. They insisted that the Qur'an was the book of God both in word and meaning. This resulted in a controversy between the two groups of Muslims. One group came to be known as modernists and the other group as fundamentalists.

Nowadays fundamentalism has two meanings. To me one meaning is right, the other meaning is wrong.

One meaning of Islamic fundamentalism is to take it in the sense of sticking to the fundamentals, called 'ittiba', adhering to them in both letter and spirit.

Present age is the age of religious freedom. If someone says that he will adhere to his religion literally, there is no reason to raise an objection. Such a person is only exercising his religious freedom. But if Islamic fundamentalism is taken in the second meaning of imposing it on others by force, for instance, if some Muslims hold that they will not compromise with others in the matter of their religion, and that they have to impose the teachings of their religion on others by force, then in such a case, Islamic fundamentalism will go against the spirit of Islam as well as reason.

This second concept of Islamic fundamentalism has produced what is known in modern times as Islamic extremism or Islamic terrorism. But the truth is that the terms Islamic extremism or Islamic terrorism are self contradictory. Islam is a religion of tolerance and peace. It is defamatory to attribute the words terrorism or extremism to Islam. In fact, there is no room for terrorism or extremism in Islam. The Prophet of Islam has observed: "The religion revealed to me is a religion of kindness and tolerance." There is no room for violence in Islam for any reason whatsoever. Thus Islamic fundamentalism in this second sense is not acceptable to Islam.

After the second world war, however, some Muslims opted terrorism or extremism in the name of Islam to achieve political ends. It was their personal act. But since they carried it out in the name of Islam it was attributed by the people to Islam. The truth is that this is a misuse of Islam. It has nothing to do with Islam. Those Muslims who are engaged in terrorism or extremism in the name of Islam are certainly misusing Islam.

Islam is a scheme of spiritual development. The goal of Islam is to establish direct communion between God and man in order that man may become the recipient of divine inspiration. In such a religion it is moderation which is of the utmost importance, not extremism. It is peace which is of the utmost importance and not violence. From this we can understand what is and what is not included in Islamic fundamentalism.

The Concept of Social Service in Islam

All the teachings of Islam are based on two basic principles – worship of God and service of men. Without putting both of these principles into practice, there can be no true fulfillment of one's religious duties.

In its followers, Islam inculcates the spirit of love and respect for all human beings. By serving human beings on the one hand they please their God, and on the other they achieve spiritual progress for themselves.

According to a hadith, you should be merciful to people on earth and God on high will be merciful to you. In this way Islam links personal salvation to serving others. One can receive God's reward in the Hereafter only if one has done something to alleviate the sufferings of mankind.

According to a hadith on Doomsday, God will say to a person, "I was ill, but you did not come to nurse Me." The man will reply, "God, You being the Lord of the universe how can You be ill?" God will answer, "Such and such servant of Mine was ill. Had you gone there, you would have found Me there with him." Then God will say to another person, "I was hungry, but you did not feed Me." The person will reply, "God, You are the Lord of the worlds, how could You go hungry?" God will say, "Such and such of my servants came to you, but you did not feed him. Had you done so, you would have found Me with him."

Then God will say to yet another man, "I was thirsty, and you did not give Me water to drink." That person will also say, "God, You are the Lord of the worlds, how could You be thirsty?" God will say, "Such and such servant of Mine came to you, but you did not give him water to drink. Had you offered him water, you would have found Me there with him."

From this, we learn the Islamic principle that if someone wants to find God, he shall first have to make himself deserving of this by helping the poor and the needy. This act becomes a means of spiritual progress for him. And there is no doubt about it that it is only those people who have elevated themselves spiritually, who will find God.

This culture of mercy and compassion approved of by God is not limited to human beings, but extends also to the animal world. We must be equally sympathetic to animals. The Hadith gives us many guidelines on how to look after animals and treat them with fairness. There are duties laid down by God. One who is cruel to animals risks depriving himself of God's mercy.

Two significant examples have been mentioned in a hadith. One of them concerns a devoutly religious woman, who spent most of her time in worship. But one day she became enraged at a cat and trussed it up with a rope, depriving it of food and water. The cat remained tied up in this state until she died of thirst and hunger. God so strongly disapproved of this that, despite of the woman's great devotions, He decreed that she be cast into hell.

The other incident concerns a woman who, a prostitute by profession, was generally despised by people. One day she was going along a path when she found a dog lying on the ground dying of thirst. This woman felt sympathy for it. She looked here and there, but there was no water to be seen anywhere. Then she noticed a well nearby with water deep within it. But there was nothing with which to draw water from it. Then she thought of her shawl to which she tied her shoe and by lowering this into the well she was able to bring up water which she poured into the mouth of the dying dog. She did this several times until the dog's thirst was quenched. Then it revived and walked happily away. According to the Hadith God was so pleased with this human gesture that He decreed that she should enter paradise.

This comparative example shows that over and above we must be merciful even to animals. Those men and women who have no feelings of mercy and compassion for living things are valueless in the eyes of God. On the other hand, those men and women who do have mercy and compassion for living things will be adjudged God's favoured servants.

Islamic belief softens the hearts of its believers. That is why when Islamic belief penetrates into people's hearts they will of necessity become kind and compassionate to others. They will see everyone with eyes of 'love and compassion,' they will have this urge within them to serve others, and fulfill others' needs.

If even after adopting the beliefs of Islam, feelings of love and compassion do not well up in the heart of its adherent, he should rethink whether or not Islamic beliefs have truly found a place in his heart and mind, whether or not he is able to fully practice what he believes and whether or not he has succeeded in moulding himself entirely into the path of Islam.

When Umar Faruq, the second Caliph of Islam, travelled from Medina to Palestine, he had taken only one camel alongwith him. He said that if he continued to ride the camel during the entire journey it would be cruelty to the animal, so it must be given rest. Therefore he rode and walked by turns so that the camel should have periods of rest, until he reached his destination.

This shows that if a true spirit of Islam is inculcated in a person, he becomes so compassionate to all living beings that even at the cost of his own comforts he extends a helping hand to others.

As it is put in a hadith, "By God, he is not a Muslim who eats his fill, while his neighbour goes hungry." This shows that a Muslim is one who is as concerned with others' hunger and thirst as he is with his own; who is concerned not only with his own person but with the whole of humanity.

According to another hadith, you should "extend greetings to people, feed them and earn your place in heaven." This shows that according to Islam that person is worthy of heaven whose heart is impatient for others' peace and good will, who is eager to share with everyone, whether it be food, clothes or medical help, etc. In short, one should share in people's pain and suffering.

Islam is a religion of humanity. Islam considers serving others as a great act of worship. According to the teachings of Islam, it is only in serving people that we shall have a share in God's mercy.

The Creative Plan of God

The system of guidance in this world is based on the principle of faith in the Unseen (2:3). That is, all realities are placed here in invisible state. Now it is man's job to bring into play his intellectual powers and discover these hidden realities and then lead his life in complete accordance with them.

Now what is required of man is to give all greatness to God, in spite of the fact that God's greatness is not visible to the naked eye. Similarly, it is required of man that he joins hands with the preachers of truth, however since the preachers always come in the form of common men, this recognition (of the preacher) is possible only for a person who has the ability to penetrate beyond appearances.

This is also the case with matters of the world. There were great potential in matter, but all of these lay hidden inside the earth. Discovering these material potential and developing them into the form of an advanced civilization was the job to be performed by man. It was this task which man has performed on a large scale in modern times.

It would be true to say, therefore, that the method of nature is exactly the same, as is termed 'the discovery method' in the science of education.

Man has been given a brain of high quality, having potentially all the necessary abilities in order to put this discovery method into practice. Man's mind had the capacity to arrive at the realities of things by thinking deeply. It was thus possible for him to recognize his Creator on the one hand and discover hidden material blessings and put them into use for building his civilization, on the other.

The status of the Prophet in this process is one of a reliable guide. God's message gives man those basic principles in the light and guidance of which he may begin his journey of discovery and arrive ultimately at the destination of success. The reality arrived at in this way is man's personal discovery. It deeply influences his whole personality. It becomes for him an eternal asset of his life.

But when we see the history of the world we learn that soon after the beginning of humanity on earth, absolutism (system of coercion) was established in the form of monarchy. The entire populated world came under the rule of certain kings. To consolidate their power these kings adopted the system of total absolutism. In this way free thinking and freedom of expression was totally uprooted. What is called freedom of speech never existed in the ancient world.

It is this coercive system which was a permanent obstacle to the propagation of the message of the prophets. Then this same system of coercion remained a continuous obstacle to the path of scientific discoveries and advancement. For any idea requires free thinking, free discussion for its development. In the old system of coercion people were denied of freedom of speech, hence open intellectual exercise was not possible in those times.

Besides general prophethood the Prophet of Islam was also entrusted the task of breaking this system of coercion established in the world. For this he was specially provided with all the necessary help needed to perform this great task. That is why within a space of less than one hundred years he along with his companions either broke the institutions of imperial absolutism all over the world or weakened them so considerably that they could not stand long. In this connection the jihad (military oppression conducted by the Prophet and his companions were, in their reality, a kind of divine 'oppression' with a definite goal of demolishing the artificial/man-made system of coercion and replacing it with the system of nature based on freedom of speech, in order to throw open the floodgate of worldly as well as religious progress for humanity.

It is this system which is called fitna (mischief) in the Qur'an and the believers have been commanded to wage war with the upholders of this coercive system so that the matter of religion rests only with God (Al-Anfal 39). In this verse religion is referred not to Shari'ah but to the religions of nature. That is, this verse asks believers to wage war with those oppressors who disturb the creative scheme of God. Only through their subjugation the unnatural system of suppression of speech established through dictatorial absolutism maybe brought to an end, bringing in its wake God's desired system on the basis of intellectual freedom. Only then the artificial situation may yield place to the natural state on earth. This work has now already been performed fully all over the world throwing open the gates of all kinds of blessings on man.

Islam and Dialogue

The world's religious systems fall into two broad categories, the one upholding the concept of the maniness of reality and the other believing in the oneness of reality. To the first category belong the Aryan religions and to the second the Semitic.

The Islamic viewpoint in this matter is that conviction is the very bedrock of religion. This is called iman (faith). Where a man has no firm faith in his religion, he cannot put his heart and soul into its practice. He cannot fully involve himself in it. And when the truth is taken to be many, religion can only be an outer shell. It cannot assume the form which the Qur'an calls a faith which has penetrated the heart. (1: 14)

This concept of Islam does not in any way preclude dialogue. The difference in the concept of dialogue is only in respect of methodology and not in respect of the philosophy of the dialogue. If, to those religious systems which believe in the maniness of reality, or in the maniness of paths to reach the reality, the basis of dialogue is mutual recognition, to Islam the basis of dialogue is mutual respect.

In any dialogue between the adherents of the Aryan religions and Semitic religions, two assumptions will always be central to the proceedings. One will be that while the former believe themselves to be in possession of the truth, they also concede that others may make a similar claim. The second will be that the latter, holding their position of being sole possessors of the truth, will present their viewpoint with all seriousness and will expect the other party to do likewise. On the basis of this mutual understanding, each side will listen with an open mind to the other's point of view – regardless of the initial standpoint. Then the point of view established by logical argument will be acceptable to all participants.

In the history of Islam an example of this kind of dialogue is found in the life of the Prophet himself. After the emigration, when the Prophet of Islam built the first mosque in Medina, he invited the representatives of other religions – Judaism and Christianity – to hold a dialogue with these representatives in an open atmosphere. It was a trialogue which had probably taken place for the first time in the history of religion.

There may be three forms in this matter. One could be that there is total agreement between the two parties, in such a case, the need to hold a dialogue does not arise. Two, that everyone remains doubtful about his viewpoint. In the absence of true conviction, deliberation between these groups cannot technically be termed a dialogue, but it is rather in the nature of a discussion. Three, clear differences exist between the participants while some hold one thing to be right, others hold something else to be right. It is between such groups that dialogue takes place. The condition for dialogue is dissent, and dissent will always be expressed by those who consider themselves to be on a truer path than others.

The basic question in this connection is whether truth is real or relative. If truth is held to be relative, the concept of multiple reality can have some relevance. But if truth is held as real, this concept of multiple truth will be deemed without basis. It is because relative truth may be several but real truth will only be

one. Holding truth to be real and then holding it to be many is a contradiction in terms. Opting for one will mean abandoning the other.

It is not proper to think that if someone believes that only his religion is true, he will not show respect for the adherents of other traditions. Such apprehension results from underestimating the capacity of human beings. A man, while respecting his mother shows due regard at the same time for other people's mothers. Regarding one woman as his own mother does not render him incapable of such respect for other mothers. Human psychology goes far and beyond such limitations. A western thinker has aptly said: I am large enough to contain all these contradictions.

A devotee's belief that only his religion is true demands that he convey this reality to others. But such action has nothing to do with conversion. It is only what is called iblah (communication) in the Qur'an, that is, the communication of the divine message to others. Addressing the Prophet of Islam, the Qur'an has this to say: You are not at all a warder over them. (88:22)

Islam aims not so much at conversion as at making people aware of its message. Such action results in feeling of well wishing welling up in his heart, rather than the result of the feelings of superiority. So far as forced conversion is concerned, that is totally unlawful in Islam.

It is human nature to want to share with others anything good which one has discovered. It is only very selfish and narrow-minded people who like to reserve the good things of this life exclusively for themselves. According to Islam this is the case with truth, when the truth is discovered, a man's humanity itself gives him a great urge to communicate it to others. The discovery of truth and the communication of this discovery are, in fact, inseparable.

Some extremist Muslims indulging in violence in our times have led people to the conclusion that Islam is an intolerant religion. But this is certainly not true. Islam is as tolerant a religion as any other. The only difference between Islam and other religions is that while to some religions tolerance is based on mutual recognition, to Islam tolerance is based on mutual respect. On this matter the Islamic viewpoint can be summed up as: Follow one and respect all.

Bringing harmony to human society is undoubtedly a noble goal. But harmony relates to social behaviour rather than to the adoption of a theoretical position. If we want to encourage a brotherly relationship to develop between two people, one wearing white shirt and the other a coloured one, this will not come about by abhorring the difference in the colour of their apparel or insisting on uniformity of colour. The establishment of harmony between the two is fully possible by admitting and accepting the difference in colour. Our past history is witness to this and we repeatedly see the truth of this in present day events.

The natural formula for brotherhood is to overlook differences and to show a proper respect for the right of others. This is the Islamic viewpoint in this matter. Misunderstanding on this subject has been created by taking certain verses from the Qur'an to suggest that the Qur'an commands the waging of war on and the subjugation of all the nations of the world. It is said that in such a case it is impossible

for the adherents of Islam to live peacefully with the followers of other religions. But this is a sheer misunderstanding. Wherever the Qur'an has indicated that warfare is in order, it is solely on the grounds of defence.

All the nations of the world have it enshrined in their constitutions that if any country or group attacks them, they will fight to defend themselves. All these nations are nevertheless living peacefully under the U.N. umbrella. Exactly the same is the case with Islam. Islam issues no injunction to wage war except in case of defence. In the absence of aggression, no fighting will take place. The general rule in Islam is peaceful co-existence, with war only as a last resort, when circumstances make it unavoidable.

Follow one and respect all

On the question of social harmony, Islamic tenets are based on the realities of nature. The truth is that differences are a part of life. The fact that no two human beings think alike has been proved by psychological and biological studies. This is so marked a feature of the human psyche that each of the calls of the human body bears its stamp. So any formula which seeks to eradicate differences in order to bring about unity is simply not feasible. The only possible and practicable formula is to tolerate differences so that all may live in unity and harmony. Islam being a religion of nature remains in consonance with nature in the formulation of its approaches.

It would not be true to say that the concept of single truth begets intolerance, while the concept of multiple truth stands for tolerance. Those who hold to this view are perhaps equating multiple truth with agnosticism. But this is an invalid proposition. It is, of course, possible for agnostic, or one who is lukewarm towards religion, to become indifferent to others' concepts. But the case of the staunch adherent of religion is an entirely different matter, for religion, whether advocating multiple or single truth, necessarily produces conviction. And the moment conviction becomes a factor to be reckoned with, it becomes impossible to weigh one set of beliefs against another.

This is why we see the believer in multiple truth present his viewpoint with the same intensity as the believer in the oneness of reality. Both are strong in the advocacy of their ideas, both are equally severe in their appraisal of each other's standpoints. Both desire equally that their views should prevail and the other's views be proved untrue. Past history and current affairs abound in such attitudes.

A harmonious society is formed by tolerating rather than by bulldozing various viewpoints. The right way to engender tolerance is to bring about the kind of intellectual awakening which will make people realise that whatever the circumstances, they have to live in this world through adjustment. In this world of dissension the only secret of a peaceful life is to keep all differences on a strictly intellectual plane, so that they may not lead to violence in practical life.

In Search of a Formula for Peace

Peace is a must for all kinds of constructive activities. No peace no progress, no peace no development. Because of this importance, every religion including Islam, has laid great emphasis on peace. That is why everyone is desirous of peace. All men and women want to live in a peaceful atmosphere. But it is also a fact that nowhere people are enjoying peace today. Peace is yet to be achieved. Peace remains a distant dream for all of us.

Now, what is the reason behind this failure? The reason is that peace is a bilateral issue. But everyone wants to secure peace on unilateral basis. Everyone wants to receive peace on his own terms without taking others into account. But this kind of approach is unrealistic and impractical. You know, our world is a world of diverse interests. And in such a world, unilateralism of this kind is simply not feasible. Now, let's have a look at history, which is mentioned in the Qur'an as the Days of God.

A study of history tells us that practically there are only two formulas available for peace. And that whenever peace has been achieved it was achieved by following one of the two formulas.

Now the first formula for peace is that of give and take. That is, gaining something by giving something to the other party. The second formula for securing peace is to accept the status quo. Refusal to accept the status quo results in war. And acceptance of the status quo results in peace.

Now, it is circumstances that determine which one of the two formulae is applicable to any given situation. This is the gist of what I have found after a long study of Islam as well as of human history.

In short, peace is the outcome of co-existence. And peaceful co-existence is the only way of existence on this planet. This is the lesson we learn from history. Either we co-exist or cease to exist. There is simply no other option.

Some practical examples

The early Islamic history provides an example of the first formula for peace. There is a well known incident which is recorded in seerah books as Sahifa al-Madina (Madina Declaration). When the Prophet of Islam came to Medina, after migration from Mecca, the city was inhabited at that time by both Muslims and non-Muslims. The Prophet secured peace by following the formula of give and take. The Prophet obtained some civic rights for Muslims by acknowledging some civic rights for non-Muslim community. In this way a peaceful society came into existence in Medina.

The Sultanate of Oman gives us a recent example of this kind of peace. Land disputes at border had continued between Oman and Yemen for a long period of time. It was in early 70's that the Sultan of Oman established peace on the principle of give and take. Consequently, all the gates of progress which had remained closed for so long were now opened for Oman.

The example of the second formula for peace is Suh al-Hudaybiya (Hudaybiya Peace Treaty) in the early history of Islam. On this occasion the Prophet of Islam accepted the status quo and returned to Medina. This enabled him to make a 10-year peace treaty with his rival group. And then he engaged himself in the completion of his constructive projects.

In present times Japan presents an example of securing peace by following this formula. After the Second World War Japan accepted the status quo as against the United States. As a result, an atmosphere of peace immediately prevailed between the two nations. And Japan found the opportunity to devote itself to its plans for progress and development.

These are the only two possible and practicable formulas for securing peace. It will depend upon circumstances which formula has to be adopted.

It is essential to learn in the matter of peace that the objective of peace is not present gain, it is always future gain. The goal of peace essentially is to normalize the situation so that the process of progress and development may be set in motion. The criterion of peace is not what has been achieved at the time of peace settlement, but what opportunities are opened up in the wake of the settlement of peace.

An Incident

Now, I want to narrate an incident very relevant to the subject under discussion here. I visited Jerusalem for the first time in August 1995. As you know, Jerusalem is a well known place of conflict in the world. I was walking around the Arab Sector of the city. At one place I saw that some Palestinian children were singing this Arabic song in chorus:

Let's make war, let's make war. For war is the way to success.

I went up to them and told them that it would be much better for them to sing their song like this:

Let's make peace, let's make peace. For peace is the way to success.

The children smiled at this. One child about ten years of age got so excited that he rushed to offer me an olive branch which is considered to be a symbol of peace. Needless to say that I accepted that with thanks. It was indeed the response of nature represented by an innocent child. It is my firm belief that nature loves peace and that if we appeal human nature the response no doubt will be greatly positive.

In the end I pray God for the success of this conference for promoting peace in national and international life.

How the Qur'an was Compiled

The Qur'an, according to Muslim belief, is a book of revelations from God. Today, it exists in the form of a book, but all the 114 chapters of the Qur'an were not revealed at one time. They were sent bit by bit, according to circumstances over a period of 23 years.

The Qur'an is pivotal to all Muslim activities. Muslims recite the Qur'an daily, and read portions from it in their prayers five times a day. Over and above this, they read it out to others for missionary purposes. In this way the Qur'an has remained at the centre of Muslims' activities since day one. Even at night in the Tahajjud prayer Muslims recite long passages from the Qur'an in its observance.

In ancient times before the printing press had been invented, information used to be preserved in human memory. Oral tradition in those days functioned as libraries would today. This system made it possible for the revelations of the Qur'an to be preserved in the memory of a large number of the devotees. And to this day, even with printing presses now being available, the institution of memorizing the Qur'an is still alive all over the Muslim world.

But the message of the Qur'an was not transmitted purely by oral tradition even during the lifetime of the Prophet. Among his companions were a select group of about half a dozen katib-ewahy – transcribers of the revelations. A few of these scribes were always present and whenever any part of the Qur'an was revealed, the Prophet would recite it to them. Thereupon, at the exact moment of revelation, they would not only commit it to memory, but would write it down on any available material, such as paper, bones, leather or skin. In former times when the accepted way of disseminating the subject matter of a book was to memorize it, then recite it, it was quite exceptional that the Qur'an should have been both memorized and preserved in writing. This was like having a 'double checking' system, whereby memory plus written words and written words plus memory could be constantly checked against each other.

The second point concerns the arrangement of the verses and chapters of the Qur'an. When the Qur'an was revealed in parts, at different times according to the demand of circumstances, how did it come to be arranged in its present form? We find the answer in books of hadith. It has been proved from authentic traditions that the angel Gabriel, who conveyed the revelations of God to the Prophet, had himself arranged these verses. According to the traditions, each year during the month of Ramazan, the angel Gabriel came to the Prophet and recited before him all the Quranic verses revealed up till that time, in the order in which they exist today. And after listening to the recitation by the angel Gabriel, the Prophet repeated the verses in the order in which he had heard them from Gabriel. This dual process has been termed al-Irza, 'mutual presentation' in the books of hadith.

It is also established in these books that in the last year of the Prophet's life, when the revelations had been completed, Gabriel came to the Prophet and recited the entire Qur'an in the existing order twice, and similarly the Prophet also recited to Gabriel the entire Qur'an twice. This final presentation is called al-Arz al-Akhirah in the books of hadith. (Fathul Bari, p. 659-663)

In this way, when by the help of Gabriel the Qur'an was fully arranged, the Prophet recited it to his companions on different occasions in the order with which we are familiar today. In this way the Qur'an was preserved in its present order in the memory of tens of thousands of the companions during the lifetime of the Prophet himself.

In 632 A.D. when the Prophet died at the age of 63 years, the Qur'an existed in two forms: one, in the memory of the several thousand companions, since they repeated the Qur'an daily on different occasions, having learned it by rote in what is now its present order; two, in writing-on pieces of paper and other materials used for writing in those days. These scriptures were preserved by the companions. Although not in their present order, all the parts of the Qur'an existed at that time in written form.

After the death of the Prophet, Abu Bakr Siddiq was appointed the first caliph. It was during his caliphate that the compilation of the Qur'an was carried out. Zaid ibn Thabit, the Prophet's foremost scribe, and an authority on the Qur'an was entrusted with this task. His work was more a process of collection than of compilation. That is, the scattered bits and pieces of the Qur'an in written form were collected by him, not so that they could be assembled and bound in one volume, but so that they could be used to verify the authenticity of the Qur'an as memorized by countless individuals and passed on in oral tradition. Once this exact correspondence between the oral and written forms of the Qur'an had been established beyond any reasonable doubt, Zaid proceeded to put the verses of the Qur'an down on paper in their correct order. The volume he produced was then handed over to the caliph, and this remained in the custody of the Prophet's wife, Hafsa. The third caliph Osman arranged for several copies of this text to be sent to all the states and placed in central mosques where the people could prepare further copies.

In this way the message of the Qur'an spread further and further both through oral tradition and hand written copies until the age of the press dawned. Many printing presses were established in the Muslim world, where the beautiful calligraphy of the scriptures was reproduced after its content had been certified by memorizers of the Qur'an. Thus once again with the help of memorized versions and written texts, correct, authentic copies were prepared; then with the publication of these copies on a large scale, the Qur'an spread all over the world. It is an irrefutable fact that any copy of the Qur'an found in any part of the world at any time will be exactly the same as that handed down to the Muslims by the Prophet in his last days, arranged in the form still extant today.

Jews and Muslims between Conflict and Encounter

The Jews are called People of the Book in the Qur'an. The Qur'an has allowed Muslims to marry Jewish women. Above all the Qur'an tells us that Muslims and Jews have the common creed. The Qur'an addressing the Jews states: O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords besides God. (3:64)

This shows that Jews have been accorded special status in Islam. So Jews and Muslims, more than anyone else, must live together in amity and harmony. And history is a witness to it. With the exception of conflicts between Jews and Muslims during the early fifty years of Islam and the recent fifty years, both the communities have lived together harmoniously for more than one thousand years. The history of both Arab and non-Arab countries testifies to it.

If you travel to Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, etc. you will see even today that Jews and Muslims share a common culture. It is the result of this that for the last fourteen hundred years Jews have been coming closer to Islam. Abdullah ibn Salam, a well known Jewish scholar provides an example in the early phase of Islam, and Mohammad Asad is one such example in the recent history.

The truth is that the controversy between the Muslims and Jews is not religious but political. In the early period as well as today political differences are main reasons for this conflict.

To my view, if in this matter politics and religion are delinked, the intensity of the conflict will be lessened on its own. Then they will start living together in harmony as they had been living fifty years ago.

Some hold that the enmity between the Muslims and Jews is eternal as it is rooted in the Qur'an itself. For instance the Qur'an has this to say: You will find the most vehement of people in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. (5:82)

This is a grave misunderstanding, something pertaining to a particular time has been generalised. In actual fact, this verse is related to some Jews who were Prophet's contemporary and not to all their generations till Doomsday. Owing to certain political reasons during the Medinan life of the Prophet some conflict ensued between the Jews and the Muslims. During this period of controversy it was but natural, that temporarily an atmosphere of enmity and rivalry was created. But it was not to last for ever. As we see soon after, during the Abbasid period, Jewish scholars were working along with Muslim scholars in an atmosphere of friendship and harmony in the Bait al-Hikmah and other fields. Similarly in Spain both Muslims and Jews worked together in academic pursuits. It will be worth mentioning here that one of the best translations of the Qur'an was done by a Jewish scholar, Professor N.J. Dawood.

Thus Jews have lived peacefully along with the Muslims in Arab countries for centuries. It was in 1948 that once again political rivalry was created as we are witnessing today.

I must add that even today outside Palestine Muslims and Jews are living together as peaceful neighbours in both Muslim as well as non-Muslim countries. This clearly shows that the so-called Muslim-Jewish conflict is certainly political. Using the name of religion in this issue is only an exploitation of religion. It has nothing to do with the real religion – Islam.

To us the solution to this problem lies in delinking this issue with religion. The inclusion of religion in any controversy turns it into an emotional issue. And when an issue becomes emotional its solution becomes well nigh impossible.

If were to advise in this matter I would like to suggest to both the communities concerned to do a thorough rethinking over this matter. They should separate the real cause from the non-real cause of the controversy. Instead of adopting emotional approach they should adopt realistic approach. By doing so, the issue will be solved on its own.

Differences inevitably exist in any two communities of the world. A number of differences exist even within the community itself. Despite this we see that they lead their lives in a normal manner. This has become possible only by adopting realistic approach. This same formula should be adopted by Muslims and the Jews in their controversial matters.

The Qur'an gives us this guideline in controversial matters: Reconciliation is the best. (4: 128)

This approach of reconciliation by avoiding confrontation is the only formula for a successful life in this world – for resolving controversies within as well as between the communities.

Freedom of Expression

Man has been granted total intellectual freedom in Islam. Rather the truth is that it was Islam itself which brought into existence that revolution in human history which granted freedom of expression to all human beings. Prior to Islam in all periods of human history system of absolutism prevailed in the world. That is why man was denied of intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom is no simple matter. The truth is that the secret of all human progress lies hidden in intellectual freedom.

The first benefit of this intellectual freedom is that man receives that highest good which is called fear of God in the Qur'an (5: 94). It consists of man's recognition and realisation of God in full freedom and, of one's own freewill, without any external pressure from God. So long as there is no atmosphere of total freedom, none can experience the indescribable pleasure of spiritual experience which is called fear of God in the Unseen. Hence it is impossible (without freedom) to grant anyone credit for the highest of human actions.

Freedom of expression is the thing which saves one from hypocrisy. Man is a thinking creature. His mind necessarily thinks and forms opinions. In such a situation if curbs are placed on freedom of expression, people's thinking cannot be ceased, the only thing that will take place is that their thinking will not come to their lips and pens. Any institution, nation, state which places curbs on freedom of expression will be ultimately brimming with hypocrites. In such an atmosphere sincere people can never be produced.

In this way intellectual freedom is directly related to creativity. A society having intellectual freedom breeds creative people whereas a society which curbs intellectual freedom will necessarily stagnate and as a result the produce of creative mind and its growth and development will for ever be stopped.

The proper stand in the matter of disagreement and criticism is that people shed off their unnecessary sensitivity in this matter, instead of attempting to put a stop to the act of criticism and disagreement itself. This is the demand of Islam as well as the demand of nature.

The attribute of a true believer described in the hadith is: 'whenever a truth is presented to them, they accept it.' (Musnad Ahmad) Here by truth is meant a matter of truth. In other words a believer is one who has full capacity of accepting truth. Whenever a truth is brought before him, whenever any error of his is pointed out to him, no complex comes in the way of his accepting the truth.

The highest point of this attribute is that man is always prepared rather he eagerly awaits for someone to point out to him any shortcoming of his so that he may immediately accept it. He is almost greedy of his own reform and rectification. It is this attribute of a believer which has been expressed by Umar Faruq in these words: May God bless the man who sends me the gift of my own shortcoming.

The truth is that the acceptance of the truth is the greatest act of worship. It is an act for which man has to make the greatest of sacrifice. This great sacrifice makes this act the greatest form of worship. This is the sacrifice of one's prestige; of losing one's greatness. To lose one's sense of greatness for the sake of truth is an occasion when man earns his entry into heaven by paying its price.

When one receives the blessing of having performed this great form of worship? This opportunity comes to man only when there is full freedom of speech. When one can criticise another without any obstacle. When such atmosphere prevails in society as people can speak freely and frankly and the listeners listen to them without raising any objection.

Just as the mosque is a place to offer prayer in congregation, similarly the freedom of speech provides that conducive atmosphere in which great virtues flourish.

It is in atmosphere such as these that those situations are created when a person is given the credit of the pronouncement of truth and another rewarded for the acceptance of the truth.

“Sadullah, I need a man”

During his last days, there was an occasion once when Aurangzeb (1618-1707), the last great Mughal emperor, shed tears as, raising his hands in supplications, he said his prayers. He went on praying silently like this for a long time with his vizier (minister) standing by his side. When his prayers finally came to an end, the Vizier, Sadullah, addressed him thus: “Your Majesty, the flag of your empire can be seen flying everywhere, right from Kashmir to Deccan. Is there still some wish in your heart which has been left unfulfilled and because of which you are so grief-stricken?” Aurangzeb remained silent for a while, then, his voice charged with emotion, he replied: Sadullah marde khwaham. (Sadullah, I need a man.)

What kind of man was this that the emperor was so desperate to find? What was this great problem which was so tormenting him? It was simply his own awareness that his successors, who were to inherit the great Mughal empire, were all thoroughly self-centered people, who were incapable of foresight, objectivity or self-sacrifice, and who thought only of short-term gains. He sensed that they would fight amongst themselves for personal power and glory, thus fragmenting and destroying his vast, hardwon Mughal empire.

After having reigned for half a century, he passed away on the 20th of February, 1707, survived by three sons, Muazzam, Azam and Kam Bakhsh, who were governors respectively of Kabul, Gujarat and Bijapur. Aurangzeb had felt that the only practical solution to the problems of succession was to leave a will dividing the empire into three parts in order that each son might live in the separate sphere assigned to him, and would not, therefore, clash with either of his brothers.

But this idea met with no success. Soon after the death of Aurangzeb, all three princes claimed the throne of Delhi. They then proceeded to do battle with one another for two years until Prince Kam Bakhsh and Prince Azam had been killed, whereupon Prince Muazzam ascended the throne of Delhi in 1708, choosing for himself the title of “Shah-e-Alam” (King of the world).

Shah-e-Alam, however, did not realise at that time that he did not have long to live. Hardly four years had elapsed after his capture of the throne when he expired in 1712, leaving behind him four sons, Jahandar Shah, Azimushshan, Jahan Shah and Rafi-ush-Shan. Without exception, they took after their father, losing no time in entering into conflict with one another, each one, of course, aspiring to the throne, irrespective of the cost. Ultimately, in the ensuing battle, three of them were killed. Jahandar Shah, the victor, then seized the throne. But his rule, too, was short – lived-barely one year – for Farrukh Ser, the son of his murdered brother had set himself to avenging his father’s death. His plot was successful and Jahandar Shah was dethroned and hanged in the Red Fort in 1713.

Although, having killed his uncle, Farrukh Ser came to possess the throne of Delhi; he retained it for barely six years, for his enemies finally succeeded in overpowering him. One day in the year 1719, he was dragged down from his throne, beaten cruelly, then thrown into prison where he was killed by strangulation. After this murder, Prince Rafiud Darajat ascended the throne of Delhi. But his reign was even shorter than that of his immediate predecessors, having come to the throne on the 28th of February 1719 only to be ousted on the 4th of June 1719. A few days later, he died of tuberculosis.

The domestic war between the Mughal princes considerably weakened the central government of Delhi, which lost its hold on the provinces, thus sparking off a tendency among the different provinces to seek their independence. To quote from a standard history of India:

“On the decline of the central authority at Delhi, the inevitable centrifugal tendency was manifest in different parts of the Empire and the provincial viceroys made themselves independent of the titular Delhi emperor” (An Advanced History of India, 1978, p. 529).

Events had borne out Aurangzeb’s worst misgivings. The Deccan province became independent in 1724 under Qamruddin Khan (Nizamul-Mulk). Awadh province established independent rule in 1754 under Saadat Khan. Bengal saw its independence in 1739 under Sarfaraz Khan, who was known as the Nawab of Bengal. Similarly the Rajput States, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaipur, etc., abandoned their allegiance to Delhi and assumed independent status. The vast empire of Aurangzeb had thus torn into pieces.

After the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire continued apparently to exist for a further 150 years, but this was a period frequently marred by internecine bloodshed. There was a constant struggle for personal power going on between the Mughal princes, nobles and ministers and the result was that the Mughal empire was being weakened and diminished day by day. The English were quick to exploit this situation, and made greater and greater inroads into the country until a stage was reached when they succeeded wresting control of the entire country. The Mughal emperor at the Red Fort was emperor only in name, and almost all power was vested in the hands of the English. Two of the phrases coined at that time aptly sum up the state of affairs:

“The government of Shah Alam stretches from Delhi to Palam.” and “Bahadur Shah sits on the throne, but the company gives the orders!” (i.e. the East India Company).

Finally, in the wake of the 1857 revolution this mere figurehead was removed from the scene for ever.

The story of the Mughal empire is the story of all Muslims, the greatest reasons for their downfall in later times being the same as they were in Mughal times – the pursuit of personal glory, the resulting internecine warfare and the sacrifice of higher and greater things. Personal objectives may have been temporarily achieved, but no great social order has resulted.

It is only when the individual is willing to step down in favour of higher principles that society as a whole can benefit. The sacrifice of the individual is the price to be paid for the glory of the nation. No nation can ever hold up its head, far less take pride of place amongst the nations of the world, if the individuals of which it is comprised think of nothing but personal gain and self glorification. This has never been so, and nowhere is this evident in the world of today.

Bowing Before the Commandments of God

There was a family of the Thaqif tribe of Ta'if, named Banu 'Amr ibn 'Umayr, and another from Banu Makhzum, named Banu Mughirah who, during the Period of Ignorance, (that is, before Islam) used to conduct usurious transactions amongst themselves. After the conquest of Makkah, both families accepted Islam. But at that time, the Banu Mughirah still owed a certain amount of money to the Banu 'Amr ibn 'Umayr, who demanded repayment of the debt. The Banu Mughirah conferred amongst themselves and decided that they would pay no interest (on any loans made to them) from the earnings they made after their acceptance of Islam. This naturally caused much dissension. Attab ibn Usayd as a representative of the Prophet in the area, informed the latter of the situation. In reply, the Prophet recited this verse of the Qur'an: "Believers, have fear of God and waive what is still due to you from usury, if your faith be true; or war shall be declared against you by God and His apostle" (2:278279). The attitude of the Banu 'Amr ibn 'Umayr immediately changed when they heard this verse and they said, "We turn to God and waive the interest still due." (Ibn Kathir, Tafsir)